ANDERS FAGER

PETER BERGTING

the CROWS™

the CROWS

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Story by
ANDERS FAGER and PETER BERGTING

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the largest crow is mine

I've known Peter since in the eighties and our days in the Swedish RPG scene. Peter soon went on to become a famous illustrator. He is the one of us in that crowd that got by far the largest international attention. Meanwhile, I eventually became the dark secret of Sweden's horror scene. One day while we were both waiting for different signing events at a book fair, Peter mentioned this series of drawings he'd made that had no real story to them. Later on he showed them to me, and they were absolutely magical (The fact that my parents had a Ford Cortina with those very special round rear lights when I was young helped to make things personal.) I said, "We must look into doing something with these. There is a story here."

I think it took us close to two years to clear our calendars enough to go for a walk and talk about the drawings. After that I made a first draft of a story based largely on what Peter has said about how it was, growing up as an oddball in a small town. Coming from suburban Stockholm myself, I felt like I was playing around with someone else's very fragile toys. But Peter loved the story, and things fell together with remarkable ease. The idea of not quite making a comic and not quite a picture book was there from the start, and worked. Kim was just there, as was the messed-up family, the crows, and the magic and the sticky notes. It was such an easy ride that when we stood there being nominated for Sweden's most prestigious literary award for *The Crows*, I scarcely remember us even talking much about how the story should be created. We just took a few walks and things worked, and I'm so proud of having created this book together with Peter, who is a truly brilliant artist and a very kind and humble person to work with.

I hope you find this book as amazing to read as it was to create.

Anders Fager

I had just hung an art show. One of the paintings was of a man looking up at a giant crow-like being. Next to it was a smaller painting with a boy, looking away from what we must presume was the same being, only much smaller. I left the pieces there without any interpretation or title to explain what was going on. Of all the paintings at the show, these two were the ones everyone was left looking at. There was some kind of magic there, something that happens only a few times in a career. That boy in the picture was stricken by something: grief, angst, fear . . . And then in the other picture, all of those feelings had grown impossibly huge, scary even, towering over the now grown-up man. And by now, all of that darkness was too powerful to deal with.

When I showed the art to Anders, it was as if our minds melded and he pulled a story out of the art that had been buried there all along. Writing this, I'm reminded of the family dog we had when I was a kid. We loved that little dachshund, and when he died, we buried him at our summer house. Many years later, when our family sold the house, his tiny cross was tossed away, his grave forgotten. It was as if he'd never existed. The people in our book have become experts at burying the past. And in our story, the past is very much present and alive. Black magic seeped into the pages as our mythology grew. I've never worked on something that felt so alive yet so evil at the same time.

Peter Bergting

There's something about the fringes of the world, and the people who live there . . .

We live in a world of overlapping personalities and activities, where our drama collides with the crises of others (either in person or online) on a daily basis. It's unavoidable. But that's a lie, isn't it? There are places where there is no overlap at all, and the loneliness there is different from the kind of lonely we might become when surrounded by others. We might feel alone and detached in our day-to-day lives, but the most profound loneliness requires forgotten places, abandoned places, shunned places. The fringes of the world.

Anders Fager and Peter Bergting know those places well.

Without spoiling the story for you, I can say that *The Crows* begins in a place familiar to readers of stories about haunted places and haunted people, with someone returning to the foreboding childhood home they have now inherited. What follows is uniquely eerie, a story in which the worst has already happened, and we are swept up in its echoes. It's beautiful, sad, somehow inevitable, and populated by the crows, who feel to me like the kind of thing Algernon Blackwood would have created if he'd been born and raised in Sweden.

All of that depth is in the story itself . . . and then Peter Bergting arrives. If we can imagine the cold, haunted loneliness of this story from the words alone, Peter's art makes us feel it. Simple, elegant, beautiful. He illustrates the loss and grief and childhood trauma, and the dreadful knowledge that it lingers within us. There is madness here, and menace, and the allure of surrendering to entropy and the vast unknown, which in this case wears black wings and the dark wisdom of crows. Peter gives us a daunting supernatural presence that never seems evil, only inevitable and sorrowful, like death itself.

Christopher Golden

The bus slows down. The driver looks my way. He's got a grey beard. A white shirt and a tie. A black vest covered with pins. Probably hockey and bandy hockey and dirt bike racing teams. Party member pins.

"This is your stop."

It sounds as if he wants to get rid of me. But I'm the only one who has asked him about the stops. I thank him, careful not to use his dialect. I used to sound like him once. I got rid of the accent in middle school to avoid getting beat up in Stockholm.

No one else steps off the bus.

After I've hitched my bag on my shoulder and stared after the bus's taillights, I understand why. Teg is nothing. Just a signpost for the local bus line. It's trees, and moss, and bushes. One of the little towers hunters use. The tower, the road, and the signpost are the only signs of human life. That and the power lines. And the gravel road leading into the woods.

Four mailboxes lie in the ditch. My last name is on the least rusty one. Their last name. The one I use because people can't pronounce my mom's last name.

There used to be four homesteads in Teg. Grandma and Grandpa held out the longest.

I walk into the forest. Follow the road. Listen to the sounds of the forest. Take in its scent. I thought I would recognize it. I've been driven through this forest so many times in my dad's car. It ought to be familiar. I should be able to recognize some rock somewhere or maybe a certain slope. But I could be anywhere.

I come upon the wrecked car after a couple hundred meters. It's the first thing I see that I actually remember. A rusty old car, slowly eaten by nature. I know that I used to look at it when I was little. At the grass growing on the wheels. Now you can hardly see them. It's as if the car is slowly sinking into the moss. I stand there for a while and just look at it.

I was never allowed to just stand there when I was little.

I did not have an idea of how deep inside the forest the house was. I realized that when the lawyer showed it to me on a map.

"I have seen there is a bus that goes there."

He looked at me as if I was an imbecile. One of those people from the big city that doesn't own a car.

"The bus comes twice a day. If you go now, you won't make it back until tomorrow."

"I'll stay there. It's my house now."

My house.

I walk down a slope. Surrounded by forest sounds. I've already passed two dead houses, on each side of the road. One was red and the other one used to be white. Both decaying and on their way into the ground. The forest (re?)claims abandoned houses.

Down the slope I see it. Just as I remembered it. Just like the lawyer had told me.

"Main house, outhouse, garage, and a barn. The last two very dilapidated."

I remember them as dilapidated when I was little. Things were broken and no one really cared enough to fix them. If I wanted to, I could fix them now. Because it's my house now. I have inherited it.

The lawyer had told me that the electricity works. That the water in the well is potable, and that there is a refrigerator and some canned food.

Grandma survived Grandpa by a year. She was alone out here.

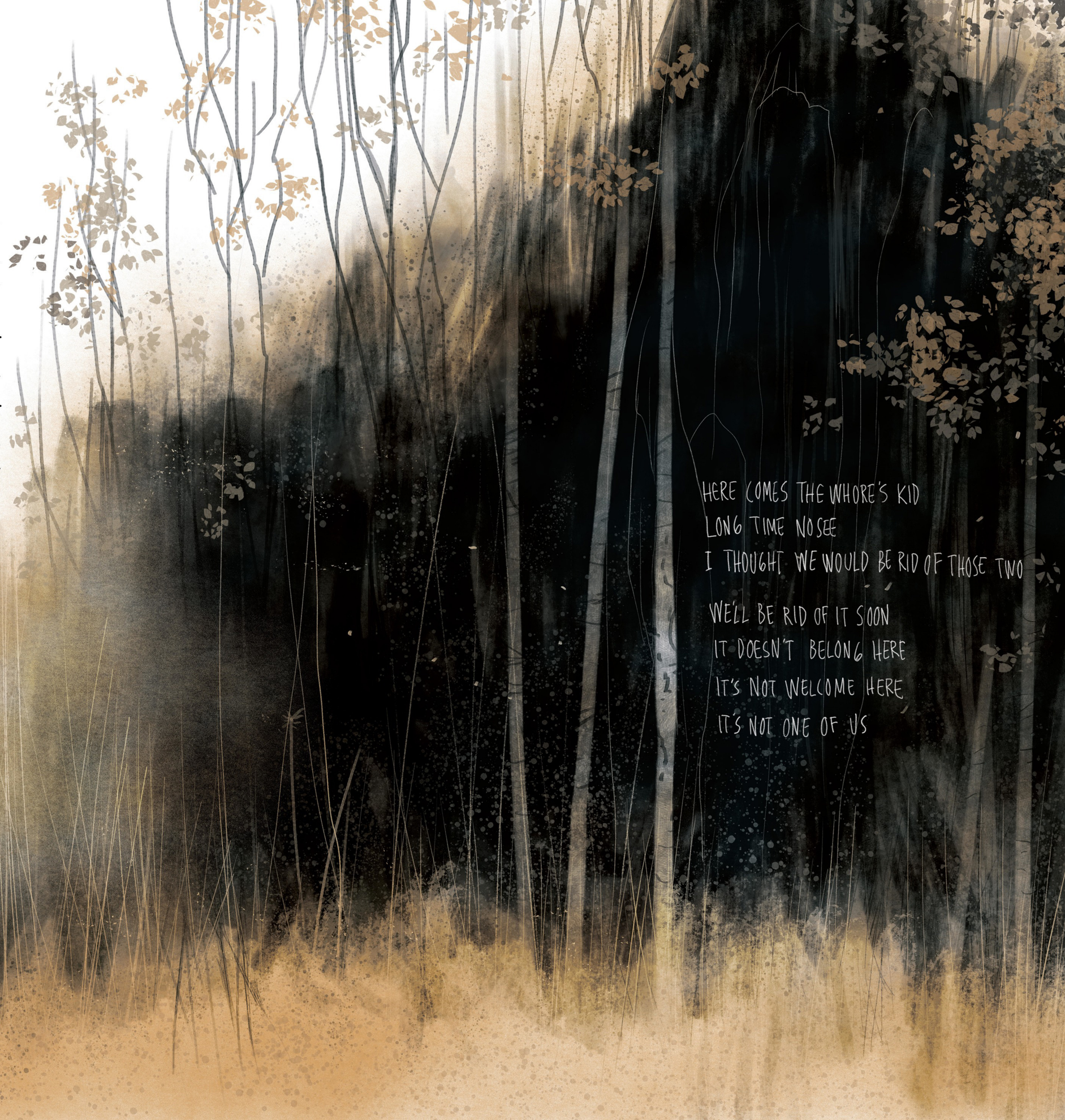
"There is nothing rotten in the fridge," the lawyer said. "She cleaned it out before she went to the hospital to die."

I walk up to the house.

There used to be cats here when I was little. And my father's dog. The one that died. I remember the clouds of crows that used to sit on the barn. I threw sticks at them and laughed as they flew away. Grandma told me not to be mean to the animals. At least not the birds. They could get mad.

I could never imagine what angry birds were capable of. I truly had no idea.

It's as if someone is standing up there, by the barn. Hidden in the shadows. Under the roof. Cawing and laughing.



My Swedish surname is on the door. As if anyone ever came here. My grandparents got their mail in the mailbox by the road. In downtown Teg.

"It seems they were pretty lonely," the lawyer said.

"Yes," I said.

"When was your last visit?"

I wanted to tell him to mind his own business. Avoid the questions about what I did that had been so important that I had ignored my grandma and grandpa.

"A couple of years ago," I lied. "Before Grandpa died."

The window next to the door is cracked. I have a whole lifetime of fixing here if I want it.

I unlock the door. It creaks and crackles.

Behind me a bird calls out a last warning.

I am not welcome here.

I threw sticks at the crows.

I threw sticks at them and my grandma told me to stop.

And then she went to my dad and scolded him about me not speaking Swedish. She was the same with my mom.

"Tell them to speak Swedish."

"They do speak Swedish."

"Not with me."

I remembered how she asked me something. I hadn't heard what she said, and Dad asked me, too.

"Do you want some lemonade, Kim?"

It was his kindest voice. I try to remember it sometimes. That he sounded kind in a way that Mom never did. Neither when we lived in the village nor at Grandma and Grandpa's house.

I hardly remember anything from the apartment in the village.

Mom never talked about it. I tried asking her. Mom wouldn't answer.

She speaks Swedish now, by the way. Good Swedish. And she has taken after Olle's dialect. He's from the south somewhere.

There are notes everywhere. On the stove. The doorframes. Big and small and in different colors. It's as if the pixels in the room are cracking up.

Small sticky notes. Everywhere.

I don't want to read them. I fumble for the light switch to the ceiling light. Flip it.

It smells stale. Dampness and piss. Dirty. Ingrained.

They didn't clean often, Grandma and Grandpa. They collected old papers. I remember how they used to light fires in the heating and cooking stoves in the winters. Remember how I used to sit on the floor in front of the heating stove.

It gets cold here in the winter. I remember that.

I hated the privy. I had just learned to go on the toilet by myself, just before we moved from the village to Teg. I could do it myself. And was praised for it. I could do it myself and suddenly I had to go to a privy in the darkness. I hated it, especially as it got colder. Having to wade through the snow.

I think about Grandma and Grandpa. Did they go to the privy in the darkness and cold? Until the end?

Just imagine going out there. When you're a bit senile and it's way below zero. With a nightgown underneath your coat. I wonder if the beasts watched them at night as well?

What if the beasts are still here?

Or did they die with Grandma?

aren't you going to read?

The lawyer didn't mention the notes. Did he think I wouldn't see them? Grandma and Grandpa got a little crazy over time. I don't dare read them. I look at other things instead. I remember the painting of the moose above the dining table. I remember the spice rack. The tapestry over the door. A Swedish flag. Three pairs of rubber boots. The one in the middle has my dad's name written on the inside.

A hymn book.
A wood carving knife.
A calendar.
A pile of weekly magazines.
New and old paraffin lamps.
A game of croquet. I think it's always been standing there.
I wonder if it was ever used.
A fir cone as thick as a big sausage.
Dried flowers.
Flypaper above the kitchen sink.
The only spice in the pantry is Aromat.
There are postcards on the wall. All from different seaside resorts.
A dog leash. Dad's dog.
The crows pecked her eyes out.

The lawyer hadn't mentioned the scribblings, either. Didn't he think I'd notice they had drawn the beasts everywhere?

They look like big crows. In black coats.

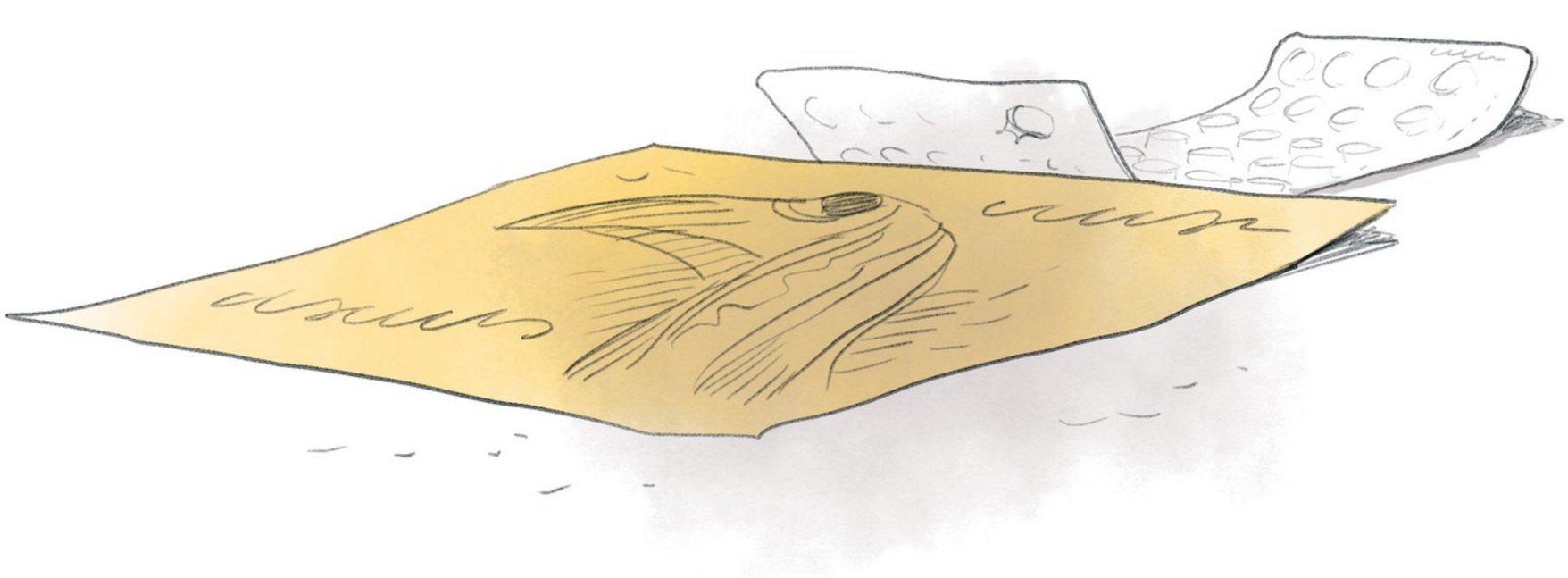
An ancient transistor radio.

A giant fire-axe.

A book about "all of Sweden's birds—in color."

A pair of binoculars.

Pruning shears.



Mom wasn't upset with me for having angered the birds. Everyone else was upset and sad. Now there would be problems. And it was all the little bastard's fault.

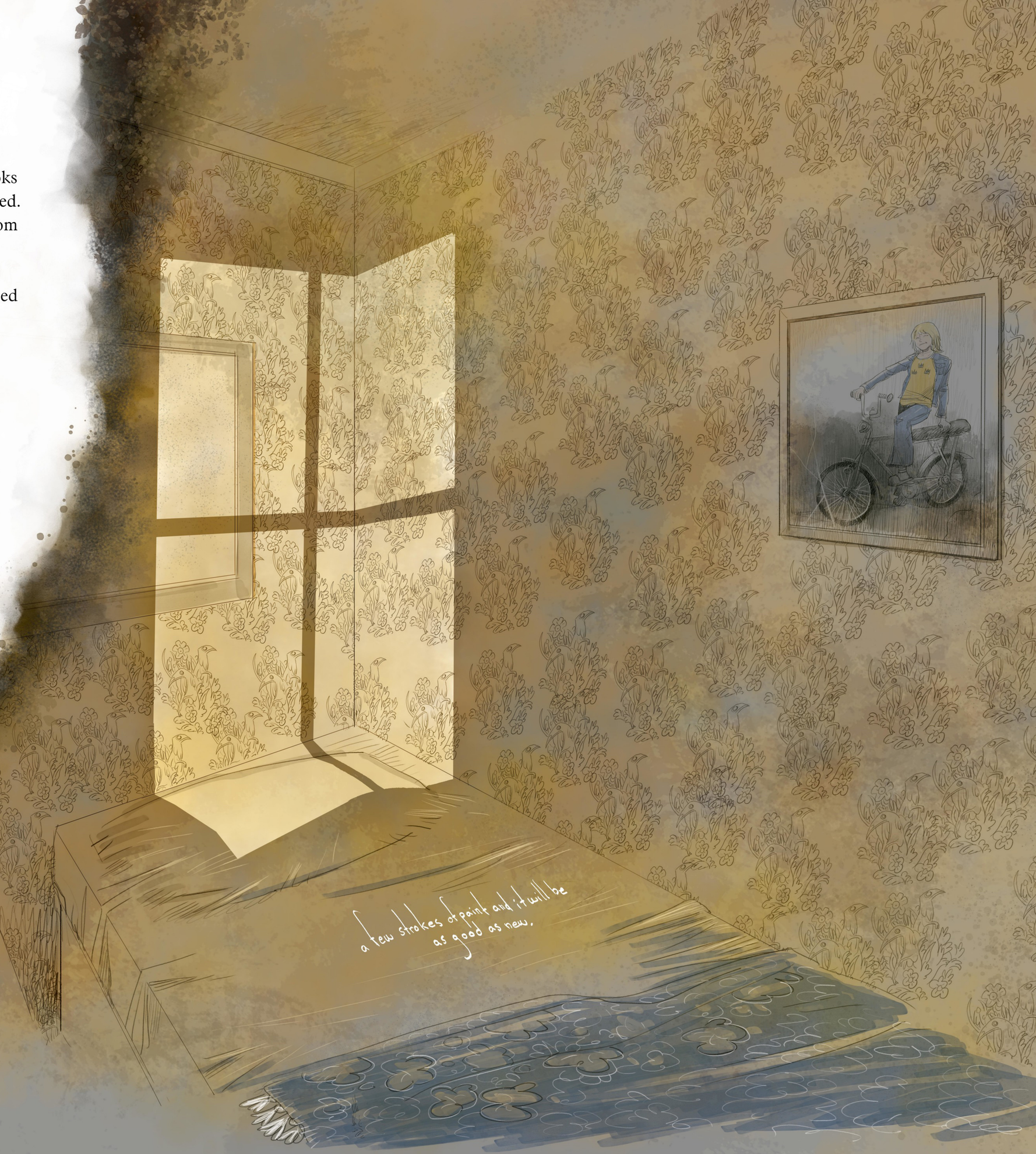
A copper saucepan.
A poster with all the tourist attractions in Karlstad.
Pills in a blister pack.
A deck of cards.
More pills in blister packs.

It's been years since I've taken any pills. For anything. I check my phone. The reception is bad.

A thing that old people sort their medicines in. A "pill organizer" or whatever it's called.

The room that my mom, my dad, and I shared looks like I remember it. No notes. This is where we lived. Dad must have lived here by himself after Mom moved out. I put my things in there.

The picture is of my dad's older brother. It's framed on the wall.



He looks about twelve, sits on a bike with weird-looking handlebars. He's wearing a denim jacket, jeans, and clogs. Looks very seventies Swedish.

Dad's older brother. He should be here instead of me. His bike had no light. He was mowed down by a truck out on the highway. One could feel sorry for Grandma and Grandpa. Both of their sons dead.

Thera are no pictures of me or Dad or Mom.

I take out a baguette. I brought food for tomorrow as well. After that, I need to look through what Grandma left behind.

Sitting out on the porch and eating feels nice. I can leave anytime I want. Maybe I should read the notes. After I've eaten.

I sit for a long time and look out over the yard. I remember how I, at first, was terrified by everything here. Of what I could sense up by the barn.

They really didn't like us. They hated Mom from the beginning. Not because of anything she said or did. But because of what she was.

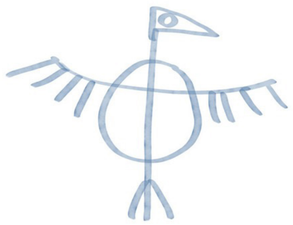
Tomorrow I'm going home.

I listen to the creaking in the walls. Listen to the forest sounds. I should start a fire.

One thermometer. Seventeen degrees.
Five thousand sticky notes.
Tomorrow I'm going home.

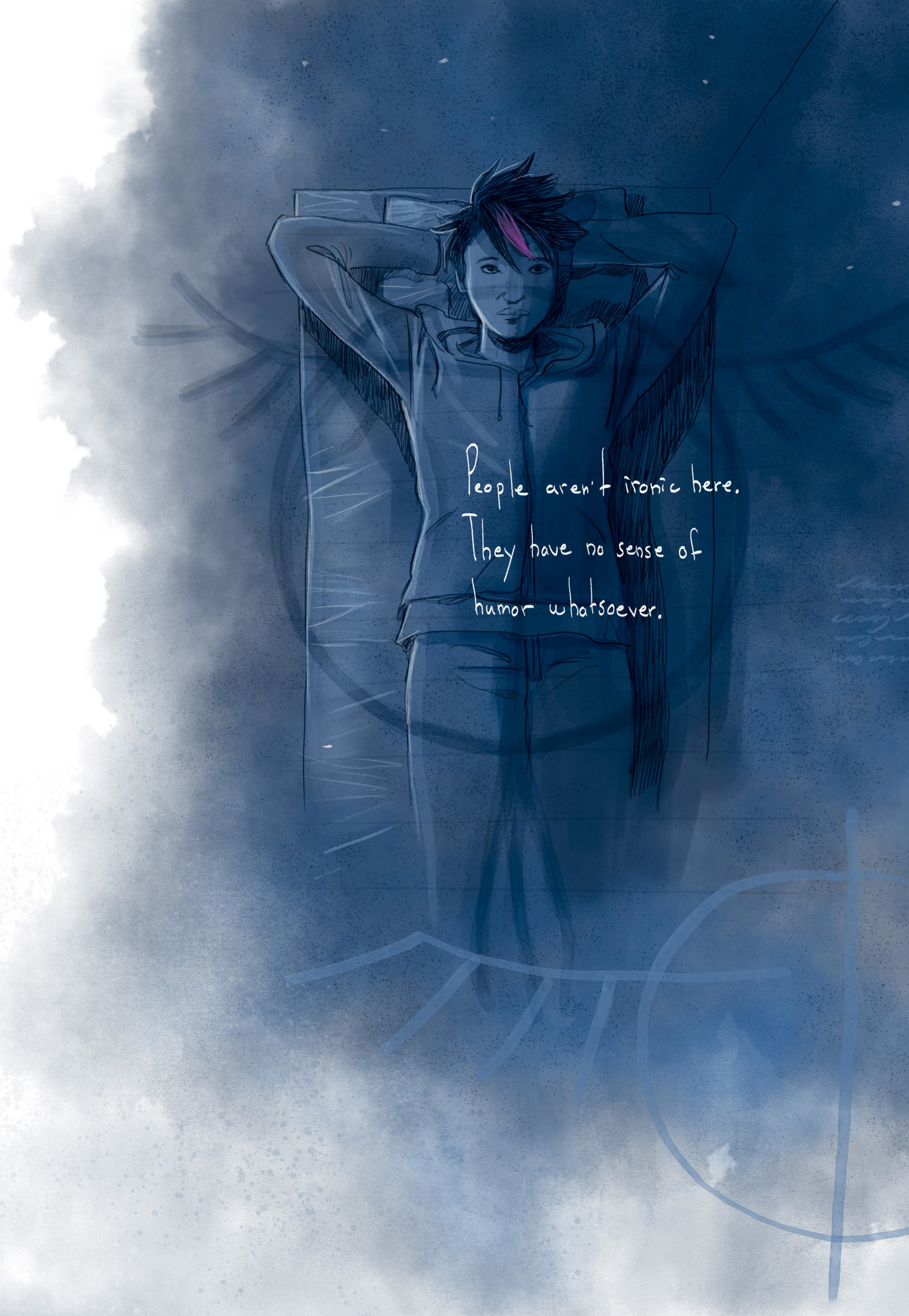
When I understand a little better. Then I'll sell it.

A candlestick with a Kurbits pattern.
It might be the ugliest thing I've seen.



I lie down in the bed that Mom and Dad once shared. The one Dad should have shared with some blonde girl from around there. The kind Grandma would've liked better.

Though Dad wouldn't have been able to provide for her either.



What am I to do with a haunted house? I wasn't planning on becoming a serial killer. I'm too nice for that. I'm the kind of bullied kid that turns it all inward. Who wears long-sleeved shirts. And thinks that it was probably all my fault anyway. Hadn't I been so strange?

Such a coward.

Such a freak.

Such a gook.

There is someone in the garden. Outside, on the lawn. A dog or something. A moose. I can hear it treading. It's black as death out there and someone is walking around the house.

dad
mom
child

dance
mom
UFO

corpse
mom
me

Someone's standing outside the window.
It's not a moose.
Scribblings on the walls.
Someone's standing there, looking down at me.
I recognize it.
The one standing outside the window.
I don't know if I'm afraid.

It takes a while before I'm able to sleep.

I lay completely frozen and listen to the sounds of the forest in the night.

I think of nothing while that thing outside the window looks down at me. It's not angry. Mostly just curious.

I can feel it. It wonders who I am.

What I am.

It's not going to pluck my eyes out.

I know what it looks like outside the window. It's a downhill slope to the forest.

One must be over two meters tall to even look in over the edge of the windowsill. This thing is even taller. So very much taller. Three meters at least. It's not mine.

I think about long legs.

I wake up as the forest sounds change. I hear the wind. Tree sounds.

There was nobody at my window. I was just dreaming.

There's no reception today. I sit on the porch, drinking instant coffee. Miss fiddling on my phone.

What do I do now?

Clean?

Explore? When I was little, I liked to walk around here by myself. I wasn't afraid of the forest and the birds were my friends. The grown-ups were the ones that were weird.

Grandma hated us.

Not because we were bad people, but because we were proof that Dad wasn't man enough to find a girl in the village. He had to mail order one instead.

Unfortunately, he ordered a stubborn monster.

Mom hated Grandma and Grandpa and Teg. I know she hated my dad, too. Though she had never told me. Not to my face.

She hated her homeland as well.

If it hadn't been for Olle, Mom would've probably never told me she was getting married. She would probably just "forget" to tell me. She'd done that before.

When Dad died.

Took his own life.

Hung himself.

Somewhere out here.

To this day I don't know how long it took before she realized she ought to tell me about it. She was not interested. She had moved on. Had escaped becoming a toothless crone in shit country. Escaped dying from childbirth or working the streets.

I remember that Mom and Dad argued a lot, in that mess of Swedish and English. I can't remember them doing anything else together. I have no memories of them being happy.

I had managed on my own. Played with Dad's dog. Threw sticks at crows.

Mom never cared to teach me her language.

It wasn't important.

It was just another thing from shit country that she wanted to forget. Like not being able to take showers or shitting in a hole in the floor.

I walk around the house. Feeling someone's eyes on me. There are more things watching me. Their gazes following me. Do I dare walk up to the barn?

Mom had lied about her age. She was older than my dad. Seven years older. And seven times more stubborn. I don't think he had a chance. Once Mom said that he was like a child.

Imagine it the other way around. That you're standing at the airport, waiting for a dude you've been corresponding with. And when he shows up, he looks nothing like the pictures, and is pretty stupid.

And he wants to screw. The village idiot.

Who wrote those letters for Dad?

Behind the barn. I pretend not to see them. They look like the ones Grandma and Grandpa drew on the walls. I didn't think they would come out during the day.

They look at me.

Have no sense of humor.

Mom still doesn't understand Swedish humor. She thinks it's funny when people hurt themselves. And not just a little, but really bad. Like in those sadistic Japanese gameshows.

Mom told me Dad had sent her pictures of his big brother when he wrote to her. He was better looking. Mom only realized it when she sat with Grandma and Grandpa in Teg and saw the picture of my uncle.

The big brother who died on the highway.

That was the first time she met them. They never visited Mom and Dad in the village. Not even when I was born.

When Mom left, Dad lived here with Grandma and Grandpa.

For a long time. I don't think he ever moved away from here.

I wonder if Mom also sent pictures of someone else.

And who wrote the letters for her?

don't pluck out my eyes!

Don’t think they dared.
Didn’t think I dared.

RUN YOU LITTLE CREEP!
YOU DON’T BELONG HERE!
WE WON’T FORGET YOU!

read the notes.

read the notes.

READ THE GODDAMN NOTES!

Sitting on the kitchen floor. I recognize what they've drawn on the walls. It's the ones living out there. One of them watched me last night.

The ones that hunted me. Just now.

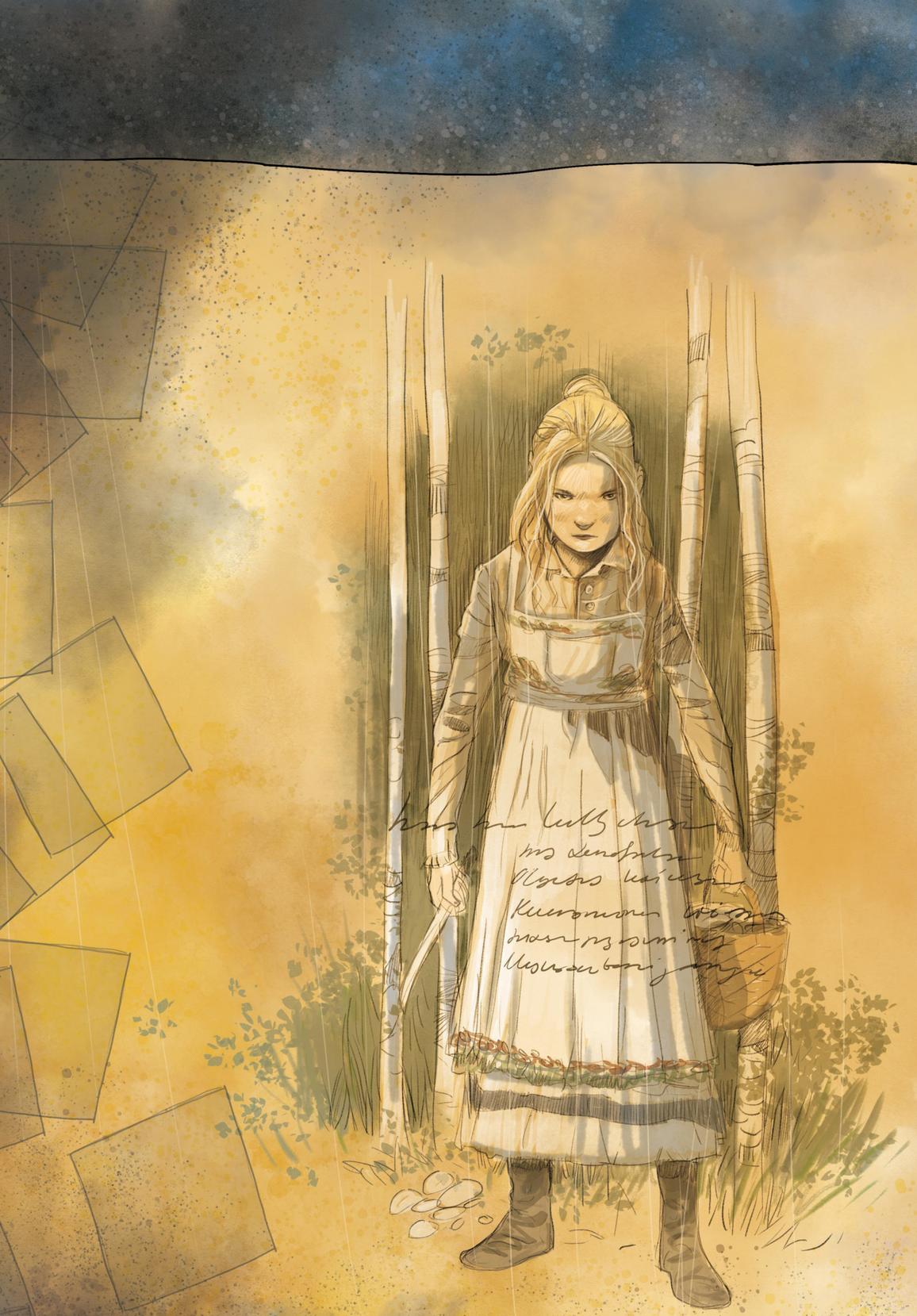
Say it.

They look like the ones in Grandma and Grandpa's pictures. The ones on the walls.

There are more of them. They rise above the barn. High up over the barn.

And, yes.

I'm reading.



Grandpa writes in rhyme.
The same thing three times.

SPELLS

MEMOS

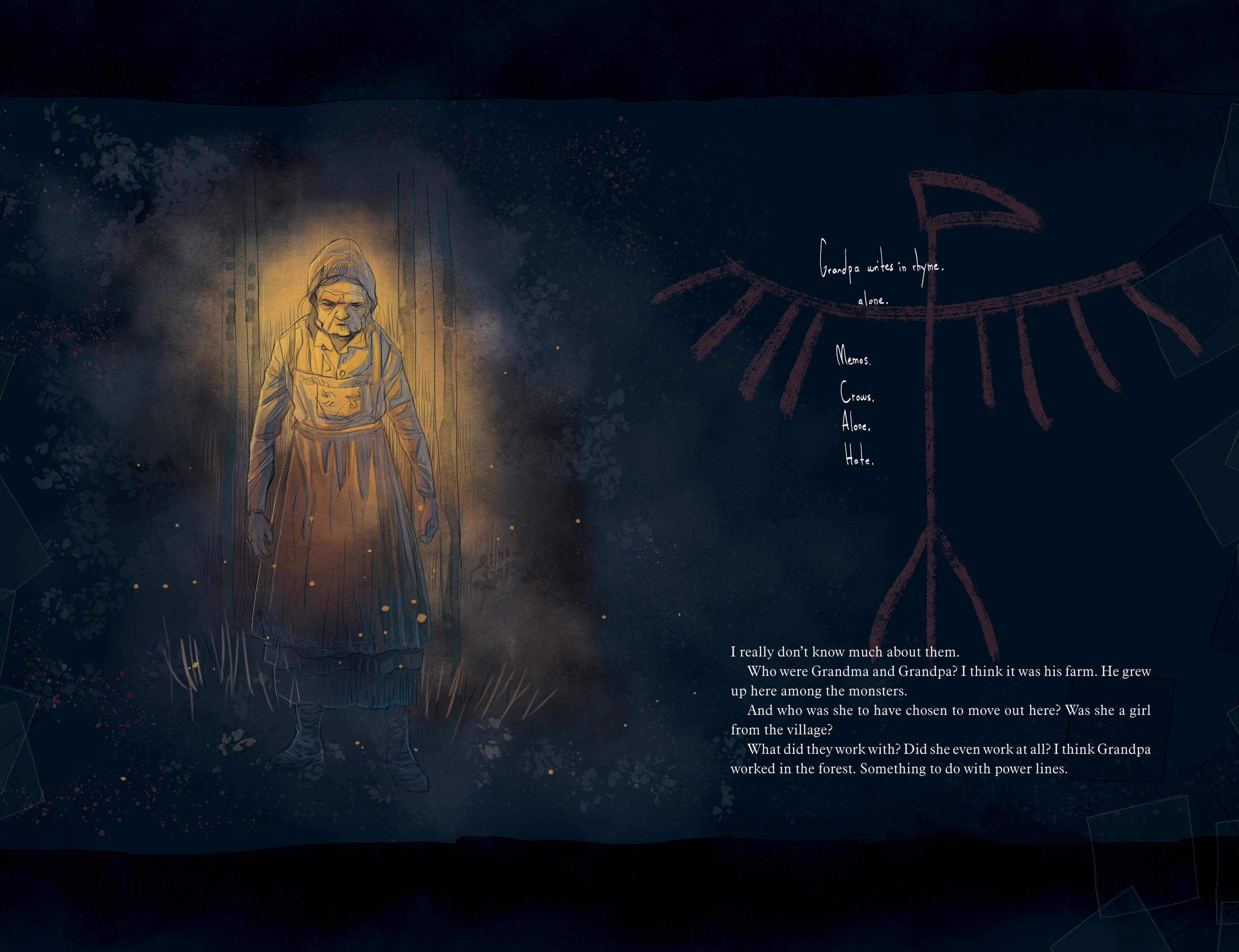
INCANTATIONS

BLACK MAGIC

Soon I learn to tell Grandma and Grandpa's handwriting apart. She writes distinctly for an old witch.

Don't forget, it says in a lot of notes. *Don't forget*, and then a list of things to be done. Or bought. There are a lot of notes about her having to buy sugar and butter. There are a lot of notes that just read *don't forget*. *Don't forget*. *Don't forget*. *Don't forget*. *Don't forget*. *Don't forget*. *Don't forget*.

Grandma, who had cleaned out the refrigerator before going to the hospital to die. She had been alone out here for a year. Alone with the things that hang around the barn.



I really don't know much about them.

Who were Grandma and Grandpa? I think it was his farm. He grew up here among the monsters.

And who was she to have chosen to move out here? Was she a girl from the village?

What did they work with? Did she even work at all? I think Grandpa worked in the forest. Something to do with power lines.

As the evening comes, I realize I've decided to stay. I eat some canned ham and pea soup. I'll go vegan some other week.

Reading the notes is like solving a puzzle made of thoughts. Grandma and Grandpa fight via the notes. Bicker about little things. Gripes.

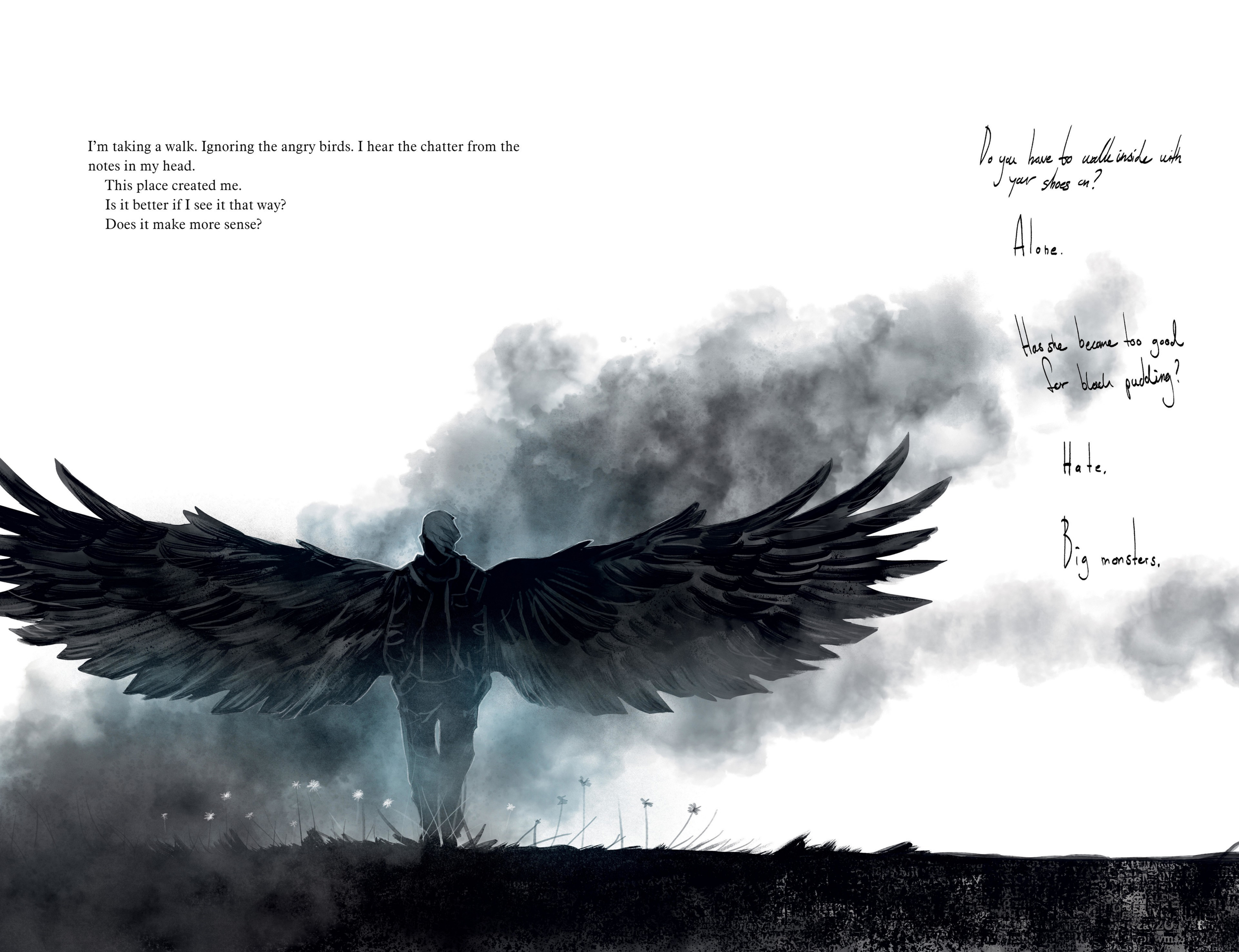
It's like it's in the walls.

I'm taking a walk. Ignoring the angry birds. I hear the chatter from the notes in my head.

This place created me.

Is it better if I see it that way?

Does it make more sense?



I don’t remember when I first saw the monsters. It feels like they’ve always been there. I got used to them quickly back then. And I’ll get used to them quickly again.

That little one walks by itself.

but I shouldn't say monster, right?

They come in different sizes. I can see that now. Two of them are really big and ugly. They always come together. They nip at each other. Hiss and growl. They don't like me. At all.

And the tall one by the edge of the forest?

Those belong together. Though the big one rejects the little one.

I walk toward the barn. Have to go inside the barn.

go away.

So much goddamn whining about that shot back.

Salad is for rabbits.

The magazine said they make excellent wives.

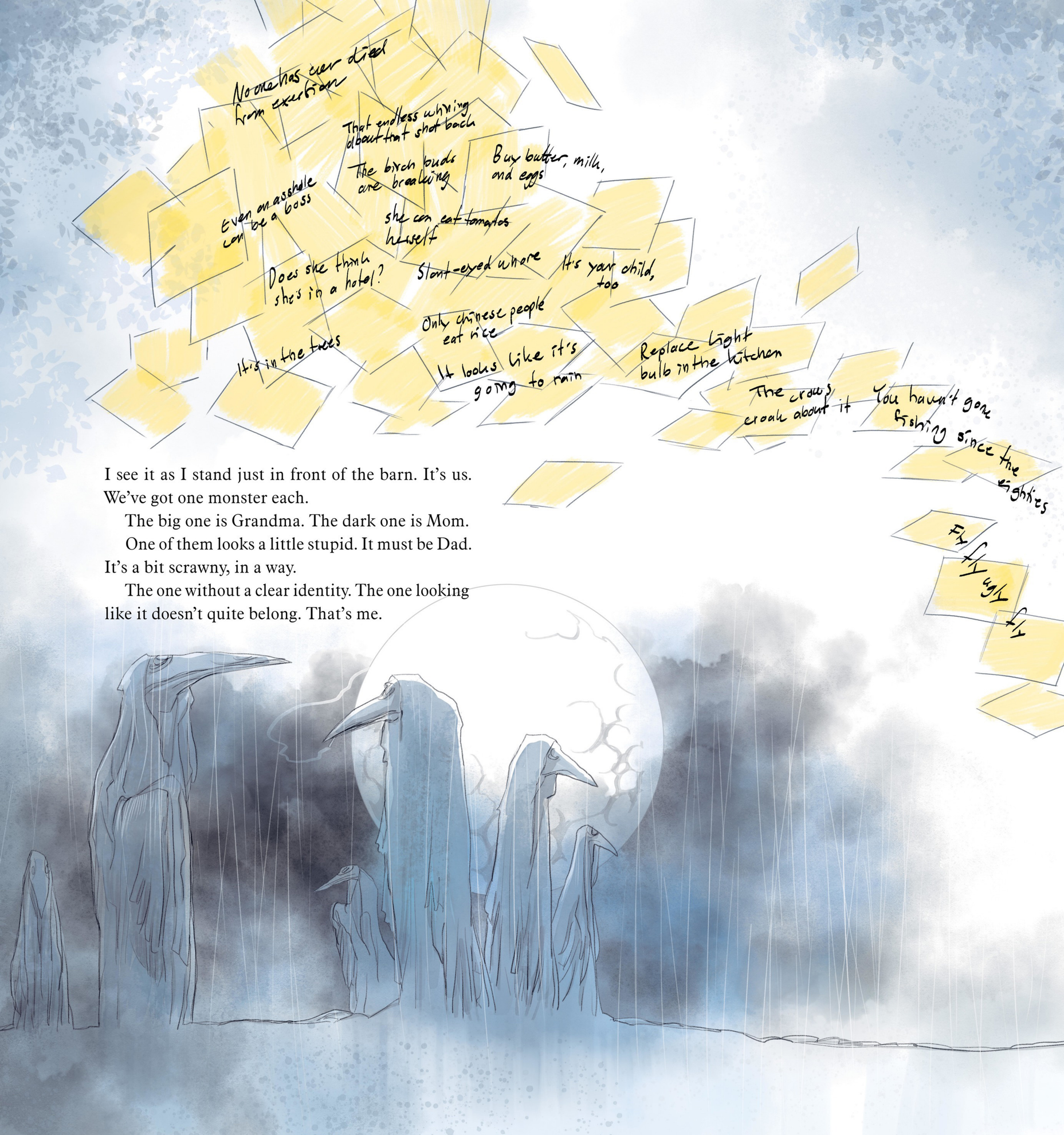
Hate.

I see it as I stand just in front of the barn. It's us. We've got one monster each.

The big one is Grandma. The dark one is Mom.

One of them looks a little stupid. It must be Dad. It's a bit scrawny, in a way.

The one without a clear identity. The one looking like it doesn't quite belong. That's me.



Oh shit. Big brother's bike.
The beams in the ceiling. The crow up there.
The sad, ugly one. Was it up there? Was this where Dad did it?
Did he hang himself looking at his big brother's bike?
It's so goddamn deranged, all of it.

The bike is completely smashed.
Those sick freaks didn't throw it away.

Who wants ant eggs?

black pudding

The childrens are dead

They are not allowed to do that in schools anymore

You cannot talk that way to Mrs. Duke

No one has any respect for anything any more

You should have some porridge

You have to eat something

The crows hate wolves

Do not forget to take your medicine

I get sick to my stomach from those

Turn off the stove

I've always been alone here

Nothing tastes like anything

the crows are angry

ALWAYS ALONE

I remember it now. Six years old. How I got so angry that I wasn't afraid anymore.

I remember the three of them looking stupid.

I can’t recall how it ended. I just remember that moment. The feeling of throwing myself off a ledge. Eyes full of tears.

I was shaking so much.

I think I threw up.

My crow was born then.

Since then I’ve always been angry or sad.

HELLO!

hello, miserable crow.

you remember, too.

WE KNOW YOU'RE HERE.
WE KNOW WHO YOU ARE!
YOU BELONG HERE!

I just have to fix some things.

buy a bike or a moped.

buy some canned food.

write a couple of to-do lists.

get a cell plan with better reception.

It’s got a bit of me in its eyes.
This place created me.
I do belong here.
This is home.

WHAT LURKS IN THE CORNERS OF THE HOUSE ORIGINATES IN THE CORNERS OF THE MIND.

When Kim inherits an old family house in rural Sweden, there are notes posted everywhere. On the walls, the doors, even the ceiling. Reminders. And drawings. Of the monsters that still haunt this house and the land on which it sits. But the monsters aren't just outside; they're in Kim's head, in the traumatic memories of an upbringing as different, other, alone. Dive into this stunning graphic novel full of darkness, reconciliation, and exploration of the self. From acclaimed creators Anders Fager and Peter Bergting.

DARK HORSE BOOKS

SON OF ULTRON

"THIS FAN... THIS MONSTER!"